

Parshiot Tzav - Zachor - Purim 5774, 2014:

*The Eternal Nature of Megillat Esther*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

*Talmud Yerushalmi, Megillah* 1:5 (Vilna) presents us with an amazing statement regarding the overriding import of *Megillat Esther*:

Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish [had a dispute.] Rabbi Yochanan declared: “The Prophets and the Writings will be nullified in the future (*atidin livatel*) whereas the Five Books of the Torah will not be nullified in the future. What is the reason? [The Torah states, *Sefer Devarim* 5:19:] ‘The L-rd spoke these words to your entire assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the opaque darkness, with a great voice, which did not cease...’” Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: “This is the case, as well, in regards to *Megillat Esther* and *Torah shel Ba'al Peh* (Oral Law) – neither of them will be nullified. The Torah says [in regard to the Five Books of the Torah] ‘with a great voice, which did not cease,’ and [*Megillat Esther* 9:28] states later on: ‘and their memory shall not cease from their seed.’ Regarding the Oral Law it states [*Chavakuk* 3:6]: ‘The procedures [*halichot* – taken as a play on words for *halachot*] of the world [*olam* = forever] are His.’” (Translation, brackets and underlining my own)

Our Talmudic passage clearly states the extraordinary significance of *Megillat Esther*. In regards to its eternality, it is no different than the Five Books of the Torah and the Laws of *Torah shel Ba'al Peh*! At first glance one might think that Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish’s words ought not to be taken at face value, and are perhaps nothing other than a homiletic flourish. According to the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), however, nothing could be further from the truth: “All the books of the Prophets and all the Holy Writings will be nullified in the Messianic era, with the exception of the Book of Esther. It will continue to exist, as will the Five Books of the Torah and the *halachot* of the Oral Law, which will

never be nullified.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah u’Chanukah* 2:18, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Our commentators differed as to the exact understanding of the phrase “will be nullified in the future” (“*atidin livatel*”) that is used in both the *Talmud Yerushalmi* and the *Mishneh Torah*. The *Korban Eidah* (Rabbi David Frankel, 1704-1762), in his commentary on the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, took the statement quite literally:

Since these works (the Prophets and the Writings) exist solely to bring ethical exhortation to the Jewish people and in the future [i.e. Messianic times] everyone will have [true] knowledge of Hashem – both young and old – and that which is explained in them as well as their many laws has already been hinted at in the Torah. [Therefore, they will be nullified.] (Translation and brackets my own)

In contrast, the *Ra’avad* (Rabbeinu Abraham ben David, 1125-1198) took the Rambam’s statement to task. His glosses, however, specifically support the overarching significance of *Megillat Esther*:

[In truth,] not a single work of Tanach will cease to exist from all of the books since there is no work that does not have material that ought to be learned. Rather, this is what they really said [and meant]: “Even **if** the rest of the books would cease to be read, the *Megillah* would never be nullified from it’s being read in public. (Translation and brackets my own)

We are now left with a substantive question: “Why **is** *Megillat Esther* considered so radically different than the rest of the works of the Prophets and Writings? I believe that three important characteristics of Purim reveal the answer to this question.

In many ways, Purim is the *chag* (festival) of manifest *chesed* (kindness) between man and his fellow man. This is most clearly demonstrated through the *mitzvah* of *matanot l’evyonim* (gifts to the poor) that we distribute on this day. The Rambam ruled that this obligation is so important that if one is forced to choose between having a plentiful Purim

repast and lavish *mishloach manot* (gifts to friends), or sufficient *matanot l'evyonim*, one must focus first and foremost upon the needs of the poor:

It is preferable for a person to be more liberal with his donations to the poor than to be lavish in his preparation of the Purim feast or in sending portions to his friends. For there is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the converts. One who brings happiness to the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the Divine Presence, which Isaiah 57:15 describes as having the tendency “to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive those with broken hearts.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah u'Chanukah* 2:17, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Purim is also the *chag* of volitional *kabbalat haTorah* (acceptance of the Torah), in contrast to Shavuot, which is widely viewed as a time of compulsory *kabbalat haTorah*:

“And they [the Jewish people] stood under the mount [i.e. Mount Sinai, at Shavuot time]” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:17): R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, all is well; if not, there shall be your burial.’ ... Said Raba, yet even so, they [volitionally] re-accepted it [i.e. the Torah] in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, “The Jews ordained and took upon themselves and upon their seed and upon all those who join them...” (*Megillat Esther* 9:27) [i.e.] they confirmed what they had accepted long before. (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 88a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations and brackets for clarity)

Moreover, Purim prepared us for the age of *hester panim*, the time of Hashem’s hidden *Schechinah* (Divine Presence) without prophecy and the Holy Temple. In essence, Purim taught us that the darkest spiritual hour is just before *ayelet hashachar* (the dawn). Perhaps most of all, *Megillat Esther* and Purim enable us to realize that while we may not witness such wonders as the *Makkot* (the Ten Plagues), *Kriyat Yam Suf* (the splitting of the Sea of Reeds) and the Revelation at Mount Sinai on an ongoing basis, we are, none-the-less, blessed with daily miracles. The *Anshei Kenneset Hagadolah* (the Men of the Great Assembly) formulated this concept in the *Modim* section of the *Shemoneh Esrei*:

We recognize and thank You ... for Your miracles that are with us each and every day, and for the wonders and the good things that You do for us at all times, evening morning and afternoon. You are the ultimate Good One for Your mercy never ceases, and the Compassionate One since Your kindness never ended, we shall ever place our hope in

You.

In sum, Purim, and its declaratory document, the *Megillah*, emerge as a powerful force that simultaneously re-forged our identity as a people, and restrengthened our connection to, and relationship with, Hashem. Then, too, they reaffirm our historical destiny and our ardent desire to ultimately see the realization of G-d's kingdom in this world. With His help, may this Purim be our final Purim in *galut* (the Diaspora), and may it herald the imminent arrival of *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the Righteous Messiah). *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Purim Sameach!*

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